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## At L.A.'s adult schools, a chance at transformation

Adult schools give immigrants opportunities for advancement. But if L.A. Unified budget crunchers shut them down, a lot of angry locals would cheer.

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A May Day marcher makes his statement for education at Olympic Blvd. and Broadway. (Genaro Molina, Los Angeles Times / May 1, 2012)

By Hector Tobar

May 31, 2012 | 8:58 p.m.

There is a place in Los Angeles where the Enlightenment's flame still burns bright.

The Enlightenment, you'll remember from history class, gave us liberty, Thomas Jefferson, the pursuit of happiness, and "all men are created equal."

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Today, those ideals live on in the math, citizenship and English classes taught at Hollywood High's adult school.

Adult school is California's magical factory of impossible transformations. A man can enter as an immigrant with a sixth-grade education from the Guatemalan countryside and come out a U.S. citizen on his way to earning a college degree.

That's what my father did, at Hollywood High's night school,

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almost half a century ago.

Adult schools in L.A. treat people from all over the world as equals. Their high school equivalency and ESL classes give everyone a chance to prove their self-worth, to pursue better employment, to become entrepreneurs, and to seek their own brand of Golden State happiness.

Go there — as I did this week — and you'll feel proud to be an American. You'll also meet a lot of people who believe this is the greatest country on Earth.

People like Yelena Mun take English classes there — she's a 45-year-old immigrant from Kazakhstan who won a U.S. visa lottery. And Lalith Dharmapriya, a 52-year-old immigrant from Sri Lanka who proudly told me he'd just passed the entrance exam to enter Los Angeles City College.

"It is a very important thing you have here," Dharmapriya told me as we sat in a Hollywood High classroom. "It trains people. It helps keep the country competitive. It gives this country a big advantage."

In this age of Tea Party-induced madness, however, nothing is sacred. There's a posse of budget crunchers at the Los

Angeles Unified School District who say we might have to shut down most of our adult schools. They've been holding a figurative gun to the head of more than 1,000 adult school teachers for months.

If those budget crunchers ever pull the trigger, a lot of angry locals will cheer wildly. They think any dollar spent on an immigrant is a dollar wasted.

"Illegals are like fleas on a dog," a Times reader named Steve emailed me a few weeks back. I had written a column about literacy in Spanish-speaking households, and for some reason this led him to rail about illegal immigrants.

"By definition they are a class of criminals and you romanticize them," Steve continued. "I am voting against the proposed tax increase. Perhaps we can starve them out with no benefits."

It just so happens that the LAUSD is threatening to close down most of its adult schools and lay off 1,800 teachers and administrators if Gov. Brown's proposed tax increases aren't approved in a November ballot initiative.

Hollywood High's adult school would shut down completely. Some 5,000 students take classes there, studying English and taking high school classes. Tens of thousands more have passed through since the adult school opened in the 1930s.

Standing in those old, Art Deco buildings with their rows of red lockers, I felt the presence of one alumnus in particular.

"I walked an hour every night to get there," my father told me. He was 21 years old, recently arrived in L.A. and wanted to save the bus fare he needed to get to work the next morning. "I'd go to class for two hours, then walk back home, and go to bed at midnight."

My father learned English and got a high school diploma at the Hollywood campus. Adult education helped propel my Guatemalan American family into the middle class. And today I write about it with a personal debt of gratitude.

But losing adult schools wouldn't be a loss just for me, or for immigrants and their families. It would be a loss for all of us, a subtraction from what our country stands for and a loud statement that we are no longer as great and good as we pretend to be.

Those cheering on this new austerity want you to believe that the many people who depend on or who are employed at the public expense — teachers, single moms, immigrants — are unworthy of our largesse. Steve calls the immigrants "fleas" and says he wants to "starve them out."



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But starving that old dog called California won't kill the fleas, Steve. It will kill the dog.

And besides, Yelena Mun, from Kazakhstan, protests loudly at the notion that anyone would think of her as a flea, or as an "illegal."

"I am an official immigrant," she told me, her English flavored flavored with a Russian accent. Why, she wondered, would one branch of the U.S. government offer her a visa while another would deny her the English classes she needs to succeed here?

"I have an English teacher who will lose his job after 17 years," she said. "This is wrong."

I, for one, will pay gladly for Mun's English classes. I'm not happy with all the ways my tax dollars are spent, but I'm going to vote for the tax increase anyway.




And when I do so, I'll remember Susana Jimenez, a 43-year-old Mexican immigrant who's been taking classes at Hollywood High for several years now. During the day, she makes beds at a West L.A. hotel. At night, she studies Algebra 2.

"Math is my favorite subject," she told me. "I want to study a technical career. Maybe computer programming."

Jimenez is halfway through a long and improbable journey that will take her from cleaning hotel rooms to mastering the languages that make computers work. But it's a journey that's still possible in this country, and this city, a place where thousands of teachers go to work after sundown believing that all men and women are created equal.

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